

## Welcome Laughter

Genesis 18:1-15

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Kory preached last week from Genesis about Abram's call from God to leave his country and go to an unknown destination. Now, a couple chapters later, God comes to Abraham again with some unexpected news.

Genesis 18:1-15

Pew Bible pg. 24

(Prayer: Thanks for scripture, may words of my mouth, meditations of *our* hearts and minds, be pleasing unto you)

*May God add a blessing of understanding to this reading from the Holy Scriptures.*

I love a good laugh. I was listening to the radio the other day and heard how a new study was undertaken to record how animals respond to tickling. The hope was to see if there was some basic tickle-induced vocalization connecting us, humans, with other apes. So, if you can imagine, researchers were traveling around to zoos tickling apes, gorillas, and orangutans.<sup>1</sup>

This is ground breaking research because laughter really doesn't get much attention in scientific circles. It is such a common occurrence that we fail to consider its history, its meaning, or its function in our lives. There is some research into the health benefits of laughing. But other dimensions of laughing have been ignored: How did we come to laugh? What does it mean when we laugh? What does laughing reveal about us?

The story we read for today in Genesis is about "welcome," but it is often focused upon Abraham and his temporary hospitality toward the three strangers. While the ancient customs of hospitality have much to teach us about the ways we can think and live today; the message here about welcome may extend into the laughter of Sarah. How, like Sarah, do we welcome the unexpected, the incredible, the unbelievable? I think, like Sarah, we often laugh. Unfortunately, like so many scientists of the past, it is easy for us to overlook the significance of laughter, especially Sarah's laughter here in Genesis.

The results of this new research into laughing indicates that we share a common response to tickling with apes. But Sarah wasn't tickled. She laughed for other reasons. What may distinguish us as humans from other animals is that we don't just laugh when tickled. We laugh under other circumstances too.

We often laugh because we find something funny, as if words were tickling us. But not always. There are other kinds of laughter. Have you ever been in those awkward laugh moments, moments where you don't want to sound rude... you know, with the head nod and eye-brow raise. What about when you really have no idea why everyone else is laughing, but you do it anyway. Your eyes frantically searching from person to person for an answer to all this laughter. Someone could easily tap you on the shoulder and ask what all your laughing is about. And, still laughing, you'd say, "I have no idea..."

I love laughter. I love watching other people laugh. I love being around laughter. And it made me wonder: How did Sarah laugh? How did Sarah laugh when she heard the unexpected and, frankly,

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<sup>1</sup> The research was covered in a story on NPR, found here

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=104952197&ft=1&f=1001>

unbelievable news that she would have a child? There she is, eavesdropping on a conversation with strangers and she overhears something that makes her laugh... did she do the “explosion-stop” laugh? The no-laughter mouth-laugh?

How would you laugh if you heard that kind of news? So strange. So ridiculous.

I think I would have laughed. And my laughter would have been a sign that I found this news absurd, impossible, ridiculous... unwelcome in my vision of “reality.” In the real world, this kind of stuff doesn't happen, right? The truth is post-menopausal births are not really miraculous or scientifically impossible occurrences; we have documented evidence of this in the past and in our own time. But Sarah isn't just laughing about herself and her own old age, she pokes at Abraham too... “have you seen this guy? Do you really think we're going to have a child together? We haven't had the pleasure of that activity in quite some time. You obviously don't know us.”

Besides, these were just three strangers, right? What could they know? Abraham and Sarah thought they were providing customary hospitality to three men—welcoming them with food and drink. Abraham and Sarah even went above and beyond what was originally offered to these visitors—instead of only giving them water and a little something to eat, they prepared a choice calf and a feast. What great hospitality, right? No questions asked, just pure generosity. And what makes this story seem all the more ideal is the fact that neither Abraham nor Sarah recognized that this was the LORD. They acted out of generosity to the LORD without *knowing it*. Now that is “welcome,” right?

Maybe.

Abraham and Sarah may have been more interested in *being* welcoming, in *showing* hospitality, than in truly *doing the work* of welcoming—true welcoming would have been opening *themselves*, not just their home; it would have been listening, learning, and letting themselves be transformed. To welcome others and to welcome God is not to invite them to be next to us—that isn't dangerous enough. Welcoming is dangerous because it is an invitation inside, an invitation to *transform* us. The strangers were really God's message about a new life coming from within Sarah—but that's just ridiculous, right? That's just laughable.

“Why did Sarah laugh?” God asks. I imagine God asks this not to expose Sarah, but as one who is lovingly confused... “Why are you laughing with all that I have in store for you?”

This story reveals just how ridiculous, and often unwelcome, God's news is for us. Like Sarah, too often we think God really doesn't know us. “If you knew me, God, then you would know I can't do that.” “I'm too busy.” “I have too much responsibility already.” “We can't labor for your Justice and Peace, God, that task is much too big for us.”

“I don't really want to be very involved with a church, giving of my time for the work of God in this world. Besides, God, none of that sounds like very much fun.” God has new life in store for us, even if we think our lives are fine just the way they are. C.S. Lewis once wrote,

“We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”<sup>2</sup>

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2 Lewis, C.S. *The Weight of Glory* (New York: Harper Collins, 1949), 26.

The good news is that God knew Sarah, even better than she knew herself. God knew her barrenness and her age. And God still promised new life for her—there was a “holiday at the sea” ahead.

God knows us very well—God knows the life we live, all of it—God knows it better than we do. And, just like Sarah, God has new life for us too. No matter what barrenness we find ourselves in, no matter the limitations that seem to plague us... God has promised us new life.

Sarah said, “I’m barren and old...” We might say, “Have you seen how many times I’ve failed?” or, “My life is a mess, nothing good is ahead of me.”

This morning, are we willing to welcome new life God has for us? The new life that comes sounding strange, ridiculous, and maybe even impossible? It is even dangerous. But it is news that begins with God looking down upon us and saying, “I love you.” And it is news that asks us to love ourselves, to love each other, and to love God with our whole person.

It’s almost like God knows that our first response will be laughter, that we will look to God as some kind of stranger and say “holiday at the sea? That’s ridiculous! Besides, I’ve got *mud pies!*” And I think God laughs with us. “Yeah, my promises *are* ridiculous, I know...”

But if we *truly welcome* God into this place, into our lives—if we listen to the ridiculously true words God has for us, and we let them transform us into new life; then we might look at the life we’ve left behind... and laugh. *Amen.*